Stop Subvocalizing

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"Subvocalization, or silent speech, is defined as the internal speech made when reading a word, thus allowing the reader to imagine the sound of the word as it is read." (Wikipedia)

Speed readers subvocalize far less than those who read slowly, who in turn subvocalize less than those who read a text aloud. So, what does subvocalizing have to do with language learning? Well, I'm glad you asked. :)

The same process occurs when you try to translate one word at a time. If you subvocalize when listening to a speaker, you actually place a greater work load on your brain because it is a multi-step process: (1) you hear the word, (2) you visualize the word, (3) you translate the word into your native language, and (4) if necessary you reorganize the translated words to form coherent, grammatically-correct sentences in your native language. By the time you have completed all of this for a single word, you have not heard at least 5 other words. If you've ever done this, you know that it is impossible to keep up. So the solution is simple: stop subvocalizing.

If you've read the About Me page or have talked with me, you know that I have studied Russian to an intermediate level. But, I have not practiced it, excepting reading emails from a couple people, since last spring. I happened to be on a language-learning website last week reading about a course (are you surprised?), which was developed by Russians, so there were some videos in Russian on the site about language learning. So I decided to watch one.

While the speaker spoke *very* quickly, I understood quite a bit, more than I expected. But when I listened to a longer video from the same woman, I noticed WHY I was understanding more: I wasn't subvocalizing. During the second video, I decided to spend some time consciously translating word-for-word, and I couldn't keep up with the speaker (even though she spoke more slowly in this video than in the first). Then I put my mind in neutral gear (so to speak) and just absorbed what I heard in Russian without translating at all. I understood better and was much closer to keeping up this time. I have never experienced this before; I have always subvocalized. But this time I wasn't subvocalizing. I think it was because there is no pressure for me to learn Russian. I'm not planning a trip to a Russian-speaking area. I don't have Skype sessions to practice Russian. I'm not taking a course, etc. This basically was the first time I had "touched" it since last spring, and I was in a completely familiar and comfortable environment, so there was virtually no stress to understand (or remember words I had forgotten), and I was relaxed.

This brings something very important to mind. Michel Thomas, the developer of several popular (and effective) audio-lingual courses, always says in his courses, "Any form of anxiety, any form of tension, inhibits true and effective learning". The emphasis in his courses is that learning is the responsibility of the teacher and that the students should not try to learn or try to remember. In fact, they should not try to do anything; they should just listen, relax, and have fun.

Subvocalizing produces tension which inhibits learning. It requires you to hear and visualize and translate and make sense of each and every word. This puts a great strain on the mind. However, if you can simply relax and absorb what you hear, you will learn more effectively, and because it reduces anxiety and tension, learning will be even more fun. :)